

ANTHONY LOYD

Russia grooms Gaddafi's son to rule in Libya

A web of intrigue surrounding Saif Gaddafi leads back to Moscow

If life imitated art then Russia's two most famous prisoners would be free by now, bursting through the gates of a Tripoli prison after explosions from a rescue mission destroyed the walls that held them, just as they did in film.

Yet for Maxim Shugalei and Samer Seifan, truth is more tangled than semi-fiction.

Despite their newfound stardom in a big-budget Russian action-documentary, and backed by Kremlin demands for their release, they languish in Mitiga prison.

The Russian government, and the film's makers at state television RT, say the two prisoners are sociologists seized as hostages by terrorist groups working within Libya's UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA).

Yet documents seen by *The Times*, together with information shared by analysts and investigators across three continents, suggest an alternative conclusion: that the two "researchers" are part of a Kremlin-approved plan to groom [Saif al-Islam Gaddafi](#) as the country's leader, almost a decade after Nato-backed rebels overthrew his father, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

Disseminated by Mercury Public Affairs, LLC, a registered foreign agent, on behalf of the Government of National Accord Libya, Office of the Prime Minister. More information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

The duo are at the forefront of a bitter row between Moscow and Tripoli that underlines the extent to which Libya's chaos has become a proxy war for regional influence on Europe's doorstep. With European leaders showing disinterest even before the coronavirus convulsed the continent, Russia is seizing the initiative.

Moscow's hopes of a military victory against the GNA being delivered by the renegade warlord from eastern Libya, [Khalifa Haftar](#), have taken a battering over recent months. The self-styled marshal's forces, supported by Russia, have been repulsed from around Tripoli and sent into retreat, thanks in large part to Turkey's decision to come to the GNA's aid.

But not all of Russia's chips were placed on Marshal Haftar. *The Times* has seen a Powerpoint presentation allegedly prepared for Saif Gaddafi by the two jailed Russians for a proto-political movement dubbed Rebirth of Libya. It suggests a selection of potential logos in Gaddafi-era green, and manifesto mottos such as "Mercy and Peace", and "Determined Libya".

The Russians, it claims, offered help in smearing opponents and even said they could arrange flash mobs at the Hague were he ever to be arrested and put before the International Criminal Court (ICC) on trial for war crimes.

Russia has made the release of the men a diplomatic priority. The Libyan government is unmoved, insisting they are to be tried for espionage. "Their release is out of the question," Sedik Elsour, deputy attorney-general in Tripoli, said. "They will be put on trial here in Libya for the charges they face."

The saga began in the early hours of May 17, last year, when a snatch squad of Libyan gunmen stormed into a private apartment in Tripoli and seized the pair. Mr Shugalei, 54, a political strategist from St Petersburg, and Mr Seifan, 37, a translator from Moscow with dual Jordanian-Russian citizenship, were working for the Foundation for the Protection of National Values, better

known as The Foundation, a Russian media organisation based in St Petersburg.

The Foundation has alleged links to Yevgeny Prigozhin, known as “Putin’s chef” for his closeness to the Russian president and the origin of his fortune in catering contracts. Mr Prigozhin has been sanctioned by the US for interfering in the 2016 presidential elections. His network of assets, collectively known as The Company, included the Internet Research Agency, a notorious online troll factory. His business portfolio is also said to include the Wagner Group, the mercenary group that has allowed Russia to flex military power across Africa, the Middle East and the Ukraine.

The jailed Russians’ boss is Alexander Malkevich, 45, chairman of The Foundation. He has a consultative media role to the Russian government and was sanctioned by the US in 2018 by an order that linked him with Mr Prigozhin and claimed he was involved in malicious cyberactivity.

In Libya, the whereabouts of Saif Gaddafi, Colonel Gaddafi’s most astute and capable son, had been unknown since he was mysteriously released from prison three years ago despite the existence of a warrant for his arrest by the ICC for alleged crimes against humanity. Yet the two Russians met him on three occasions between their arrival in Libya in March 2019 and their arrest two months later.

Far from planning a life in hiding, they found Saif Gaddafi was plotting his return to power as president. Russia, nurturing a long-held grievance over Nato’s intervention in the 2011 Libyan revolution, and deeply antagonised by the killing of Colonel Gaddafi that year by a mob of rebels, was eager to help him.

The Powerpoint presentation prepared for his political launch was obtained from inside Mr Prigozhin's Libya operation, according to the Dossier Centre, a London-based investigative team funded by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former billionaire and Russian political prisoner. It shows what Saif Gaddafi wanted — and what the Russians were offering.

The consultants advised that Mr Gaddafi keep his supporters untarnished from the fighting between the GNA and Marshal Haftar's forces. They recommended on the basis of their own polling that he use The Foundation's consultancy for an upgraded media campaign, enabled by Russian specialists and which could include the Hague flash mobs.

One document the Dossier Centre obtained, with metadata allegedly linking it to The Foundation, includes a written assessment of a meeting between the Russians and Mr Gaddafi on April 3, 2019. It says the meeting took place near Zintan in western Libya, and lasted two hours. The authors described Mr Gaddafi as "narcissistic" and noted he was interested in personally leading the new movement rather than merely backing it. "Libyans vote for a leader, not for a party," the Russians reported him as saying to them.

Mr Malkevich confirmed that Mr Shugalei and Mr Seifan had indeed met Mr Gaddafi three times last year, "as part of a sociological study". However, he dismissed the GNA's allegations against the two men as being "of varying degrees of absurdity" and said the Dossier Centre's documents were fake.

Western analysts studying the Russian involvement in Libya, which has incorporated a hybrid strategy of military and non-military assets, have described it as typical of the unconventional "grey zone" approach favoured by Moscow in Africa. This has combined paramilitary forces and proxies; disinformation and media manipulation with fake social media accounts and

messaging; interference in political process, and energy and mineral exploitation.

Some analysts have described the RT film, titled *Shugalei*, as just another weave in the overall Russian “influence” operation. Dubbed in English and Arabic and released by RT on YouTube to a huge regional audience last month, the film projects the Russians’ key messages: innocent Russian prisoners, US complicity with Libyan terrorist groups and the credibility of Mr Gaddafi as a future leader of Libya, all packaged in entertainment form on a state-run scale that many western consultancy companies would envy.

The Dossier Centre documents appear to show the multifarious nature of the Russian operation in Libya.

A file allegedly written on March 20, 2019, by The Foundation’s Pyotr Bychkov, a man described by Libyan officials as the liaison between The Foundation’s consultants in Libya and Mr Prigozhin, notes that, with the exception of the GNA, “specialists of the company are conducting negotiations and have established close contacts with most of the political groups in Libya”.

Foremost among the Russians’ contacts at that time was Marshal Haftar, whose forces were boosted with Wagner Group specialists, munitions and engineers. However, despite supporting Marshal Haftar’s operations, the Russians’ observed scathingly that his chances of ever capturing Tripoli were “assessed as nil”.

Russia’s interests in Mr Gaddafi were born not merely from their historical relationship with the Gaddafi family but also from their underlying doubt in Marshal Haftar’s loyalty.

In his assessment of Marshal Haftar, Mr Bychkov observed that even if the warlord were victorious “there are serious grounds to believe that . . . Haftar

would not be loyal to the interests of Russia. To relieve risks, it is proposed that we strengthen the position of the western portion of Libya, uniting all the forces under Saif Gaddafi or another figure.”

Mr Gaddafi has been promoted as a future leader of Libya by Al Jamahiriya TV, the former Libyan state-run broadcasting company closed down by rebels in 2011. Relocated to Egypt, it has been transformed after Mr Prigozhin’s company secured a 50 per cent share in January 2019.

In Egypt it had become a ragged and irregular shadow of its former glory, but the Russian investment overhauled studio production and boosted broadcasting capability.

The Dossier Centre describes how its haphazard transmissions were replaced with a regular service of pro-Gaddafi broadcasts to a monthly audience of six million across the region.

The Dossier Centre was not alone in noticing Mr Prigozhin’s involvement in Libya. In October 2019 Facebook removed dozens of co-ordinated fake accounts operating in eight African countries. All were involved in disinformation and influence campaigns aimed at promoting Russian interests and linked to Mr Prigozhin. Twelve of the suspended accounts pertained to Libya. Some of the accounts had promoted Saif Gaddafi, others Marshal Haftar.

“Half of them were Muammar Gaddafi nostalgia, pages saying how great things were under Gaddafi,” said Shelby Grossman, a research scholar at the Stanford Internet Observatory, who led the team that worked with Facebook to identify and analyse Russian-linked disinformation campaigns in Africa. “Then every once in a while there would be a post saying ‘wouldn’t Saif Gaddafi make a great president?’ The other set of posts were supportive of Haftar and using language concerning how Haftar would bring peace and

security to Libya. A theme across both sets of pages was that they sought to delegitimise the GNA.”

Poll results conducted by The Foundation for which Mr Shugalei and Mr Seifan worked were often mentioned across the accounts backing Mr Gaddafi, suggesting he would easily win any elections. They were never backed by links to the original poll reports.

Events over the past few weeks in Libya appear to have justified the broad scope of Russian operations there. By the start of June Marshal Haftar had been routed from the positions around Tripoli that he had held since laying siege to the capital a year ago. He now appears a discredited and marginalised figure.

By contrast Mr Gaddafi, unsullied by the recent round of internecine bloodletting, looks empowered. “Saif looks great,” noted one specialist social media analyst who has investigated the Russian disinformation campaign in Libya but preferred not to be named for security reasons. “He didn’t go to war with anyone this time. Pro-Gaddafi platforms are rebranding him as this transformative, intellectual, peaceful leader; a man of the people. Since 2019 the Russian campaign has propped him up online in a way that has brought him back into consciousness, back into public shared memory.”

The plight of Mr Shugalei and Mr Seifan is also being propelled into the public consciousness, and thanks to the film their names are now known across Russia and the Middle East. Billed as a drama documentary based on real events, the closing scene sees them both leap to freedom through the prison gates as explosions blossom behind them: a fantasy ending in a film that neither is at liberty to see.

Statement of ICC Prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, on the discovery of multiple alleged mass graves and continued violence in Libya: “I will not hesitate to expand my investigations and potential prosecutions to cover any new instances of crimes”



I am deeply concerned by recent reports concerning multiple mass graves found in the city of Tarhuna and its surroundings in Libya. My Office has received credible information regarding eleven alleged mass graves containing men, women and children. These findings may constitute evidence of war crimes or crimes against humanity.

I call on the Libyan authorities to take all the necessary measures to protect and secure the mass grave sites and to ensure that all actions taken in this regard are conducted in a manner that will not prejudice future investigations.

I welcome the decision of the United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres, offering support in this regard, through the [statement of 12 June 2020](#). My Office looks forward to cooperating with the Libyan authorities, the United Nations, and all relevant partners working to investigate this evidence of potential atrocity crimes in Tarhuna.

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In addition, I reiterate my concern at the grave escalation of violence and the high numbers of civilian casualties, reportedly largely resulting from airstrikes and shelling operations.

I also note with grave concern media and other reports of a marked increase in the quantity and quality of military equipment recently deployed to Libya.

I repeat what I stated to the UN Security Council in May: intentionally directing an attack against a civilian population, or against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities, is a war crime under the Rome Statute. The Rome Statute also prohibits the intentional directing of attacks against hospitals and other buildings protected under international law, such as those dedicated to religion or education, when they are not military objectives. Even where a military objective is involved, the attack must not cause clearly excessive harm to civilians.

I call on all parties and armed groups involved in the fighting to fully respect the rules of international humanitarian law. This includes taking all necessary measures to protect civilians, and civilian infrastructure, including schools, health facilities and detention centres.

In particular, I call on all commanders, be they military or civilian, to take all necessary measures to comply with their individual duty to prevent and punish crimes by subordinates under their effective command or control.

As I have stated, the situation in Libya continues to be a priority situation for my Office. I will therefore not hesitate to expand my investigations and potential prosecutions to cover any new instances of crimes.

Any group or individual with information regarding the commission of alleged crimes in Libya since February 2011 is urged to contact my Office by email at: Libya@icc-cpi.int.

Atrocity crimes must not be tolerated.

The Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC conducts independent and impartial preliminary examinations, investigations and prosecutions of the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression. Since 2003, the Office has been conducting investigations in multiple situations within the ICC's jurisdiction, namely Burundi; Côte d'Ivoire; Darfur (Sudan); Georgia; Kenya; Libya; Mali; Uganda; the Central African Republic (two distinct situations); the Democratic Republic of the Congo; the People's Republic of Bangladesh/Republic of the Union of Myanmar; and Afghanistan (currently subject to process

envisaged under article 18 of the Rome Statute). The Office is also conducting preliminary examinations relating to the situations in Colombia; Guinea; Iraq/UK; Nigeria, the Philippines; Ukraine and Venezuela; whilst the situation in Palestine is pending a judicial ruling.

For further details on "preliminary examinations" and "situations and cases" before the Court, [click here](#), and [here](#).

Contact: OTPNewsDesk@icc-cpi.int

Source: Office of the Prosecutor

<https://www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/item.aspx?name=200622-otp-statement-libya>